

Pilgrimage, astronomy and power: the case of the Island of Cozumel

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Abstract

The Island of Cozumel plays a quite singular and distinguished role in the historical horizon of the Maya post-classic and the history of late Maya settlements patterns, trade and social dynamics. It was indeed – as attested by the Spanish chronicles – one of the most renewed pilgrimage centres of the Maya world and by far the most important centre of cult of the Goddess Ixchel. Many aspects of the peculiar role of Cozumel, however, still remain to be understood; in particular, the ideology, the patterns and the real extension of the pilgrimage phenomenon. To this end, a comparison is proposed here with a better known pre-Columbian pilgrimage site, the state sanctuary of the Incas on the Island of the Sun, focussing on impressive similarities – which include astronomical hierophanies in the management of religious power - but also, on likely differences connected to characteristics peculiar to Cozumel. Proposals for further research are highlighted.

Introduction

The tiny Island of Cozumel is located in the Caribbean Sea, off the eastern coast of Yucatan. The place is singular in many respects; for instance, the incredible biological diversity of many endemic species, such as the dwarf mammals which are typical of the island. From a geological point of view, Cozumel is a flat platform of limestone, rising at most 15 metres above sea level. This has the interesting consequence that the Cozumel coastline is just below the line of the horizon from the coast at today's Playa del Carmen, which is located at some 15 kilometres as the crow flies. The tops of the highest buildings on the island are today barely visi-

ble from the coast, but since Cozumel is flat, in ancient times it was almost invisible, a nearby but vague presence perhaps highlighted by night fires. In my opinion, this is quite an important factor, which helped to make Cozumel quite a unique place also from the religious point of view in Maya times. Another important point is that the sea channel in front of Cozumel is not a straightforward trip for sailing or rowboats still today, and it was relatively difficult to reach for the Maya boats. Furthermore, Cozumel was 'the easternmost land' of the Maya world and for the Mayas – similar as it was for the Egyptians – west was a place for death and east a place for Gods and rebirth.

All these factors, therefore, contributed to making Cozumel a very special destination. It can be said that in a sense, the singularity of Cozumel, from the cognitive, anthropological aspect, is that it is naturally selected to be a sacred place. As a consequence, in the late Post-classic or perhaps before, a very important pilgrimage place developed here. It was the most sacred place of the Maya world devoted to Ixchel, a quite complex Maya Goddess, certainly related to the Moon and to healing, wellness and fertility (Milbrath, 1999).

The Goddess is relatively well documented; she appears, for instance, in the Madrid Codex. In Cozumel, proper, iconographic documentation is scarce, probably because in the restricted environment of the island it was very easy to carry out the destruction of the Maya idols – as the Spaniards did throughout the whole Mesoamerica by the Spaniards. However, the existence of the pilgrimage centre is well documented by the Spanish chroniclers, who clearly state that the pilgrims travelled to Cozumel to fulfil their religious vows and offerings



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Figure 1. Ka'na Nah pyramid, San Gervasio, Mexico.

to the Goddess. It is also known that oracular activities took place in the name of the Goddess; the main image of Ixchel was fastened to a wall and the priest could speak from a room placed behind it, furnishing the oracular response. The place was so famous that the bishop and historian, Diego de Landa, ventured to compare Cozumel to Jerusalem and Rome, as the most holy destination of the Maya world. The specific place of the sanctuary of the

goddess has not, however, been individuated. Perhaps relevant Maya remains have been lost in the San Miguel area; today the obvious 'capital' of Maya Cozumel appears to be San Gervasio, which is likely to be identified alongside with the main religious centre. In this respect, the presence of the conspicuous pyramid Kana Nah and its architectural arrangement point to the identification of it with the main temple of the Goddess.

Understanding Pilgrimage and Power in Cozumel

Neither are archaeological records nor historical documents enough to give us clear understanding of the social mechanism and the power structures which governed pilgrimage at Cozumel, and the uniqueness of the place within the Maya world does not help either. There exists, however, in the Pre-Columbian world a place which bears an extraordinary – although formal and unrelated – resemblance to Cozumel. It is the Inca state sanctuary of the Island of the Sun, on Lake Titicaca, which is broadly contemporary to Cozumel, since visitation of the island as a sacred site is documented also before the Incas (Bauer & Stanish 2001).

Religion was a key unifying element of the Inca state, as well as an efficacious instrument in the management of centralised power. The cosmological vision of the Incas put their origin in Lake Titicaca. According to the legend, the God-Creator Viracocha created the world: the celestial bodies, the earth and the Sun who rose for the first time from a rock on the island of Titicaca called, as a result, Island of the Sun. The first Inca, Manco Capac, was considered the son of the Sun, so that his right to rulership came directly from the Gods. On this tiny island Lake Titicaca there was, therefore, a complex and very important sanctuary, managed by the state and visited

by pilgrims who came from every side of the empire; the place was perceived as the most sacred destination to the south-east (with respect to Cusco) as perhaps was Machu Picchu to the north-west (Magli, 2010).

The pilgrims gathered at a 'hub' in Copacabana from where they were ferried to the island. Once they disembarked, they followed a very rigorous and regimented path that led them to various 'stations' of the sacred path, including the view of the 'footprints of the sun' – large marks on the bedrock similar to footprints – and finally, to the sun rock itself, the place where the Sun was supposed to be born. The esplanade directly in front of the sacred rock was probably reserved for the elite, while ordinary people gathered on the low hills just behind. From all these locations it was possible to see the Sun at the winter solstice (June) solstice rise from behind the sacred rock – thus symbolising a re-enactment of the first dawn – and set on a hill to the north-west, the Tikani ridge. Here, the stone foundations of two structures have been recovered and a simulation made with two modern posts placed in these foundations has shown that they probably were the positions of two horizon pillars that acted as markers of the June solstice sunset as viewed from the sacred rock area.

The Island of Cozumel and the Island of the Sun clearly share several analogies. First of all, both are places difficult to reach and isolated – besides of course practically, in being islands, also symbolically – and both are famous places, where people came from very far distances. In both cases, pilgrimage appears to have been regulated, since also at Cozumel clear hints to the presence of a 'sacred path' endowed with 'stations' that the pilgrims had to follow has been proposed (Freidel and Sabloff, 1984, Sabloff and Rathje, 1975).

The management of religious power is often associated with the repetition and 'control' of the celestial cycles (Krupp, 1997, Magli, 2009). In this respect, an important point was the occurrence of hierophanies connected with the cyclical repetition of pilgrimages.. Was a similar mechanism also in action at Cozumel? A complete treatment of the archaeoastronomy of the Maya buildings at Cozumel is given in Ivan Šprajc's contribution to this volume; here, I only mention that the whole architecture at San Gervasio is very clearly predominately oriented to the solstices (Šprajc, 2010).



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Figure 2. El Palacio structure, San Gervasio, Cozumel.

The vast majority of the main buildings is indeed oriented about $115^\circ / 295^\circ$ which, given the flatness of the island, corresponds to the Sun rising at the winter solstice/setting at the summer solstice. In particular, the solstice orientation is shared by the main pyramid. In view of the special arrangement of the upper room of it, the rays of the setting Sun at the summer solstice would have illuminated the figure of the Goddess eventually located there. Particularly relevant in this context are also the sacbes, the paved roads of the Mayas which typically had a sacred, official content. According to Freidel and Sabloff (1984), a wide net of such roads criss-crossed the island; further, local sacbes connect the main groups at San Gervasio. One of such ceremonial roads, Sacbe 2, is oriented to the solstices and this orientation may correspond to special occasions of pilgrimage and rituals.

From an anthropological point of view, pilgrimages can be interpreted in two almost opposite ways. In Durkheim's view, religious behaviours are induced by political processes; in other words, they are one of the reflections of the way power manipulates the worldview to legitimate itself. This view appears as the most appropriate at least in those cases in which pilgrimage was a state affair, organized and managed at the highest level (Durkheim, 1965). Another viewpoint on the birth and development of some pilgrimage sites exists, however (Turner and Turner, 1978). The latter advocates pilgrimage as a challenge for the establishment – state or religion, or both – in that people during their pilgrimage status can more easily overlap census and



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Figure 3. Murciélagos structure, San Gervasio, Cozumel.

social differences. A further ‘post-modern’ view recently put forward tries to surpass this dichotomy viewing a specific pilgrimage site as an evolving process of different ‘discourses’, as a place of exchange of competing religious ideas.

Does any such paradigms apply to Cozumel and, if yes, which one? First of all, there is no doubt that a fundamental characteristic of a pilgrimage is its ‘liminality’. A pilgrimage is an arduous challenge, involving involves physical preparation, sufferance and privations, and requires travelling in unfriendly and/or unknown landscapes and so forth. A set of characteristics

evidently shared by the nearby, but barely visible and relatively difficult to reach island of Cozumel. Secondly, the objective of the Cozumel pilgrimage does not appear to be a matter of discussion or an exchange of ideas: the cult of Ixchel endowed characteristics related to healing and fertility that motivated the travellers. Finally, although of course we cannot speak of a Maya ‘state’ in the Yucatan, in the first centuries of the second millennium AD, a clear predominance of Mayapan is well-documented and elite buildings in San Gervasio do show Mayapan architectural influence. A sort of centralised management of the pilgrimage and of its timing must

have existed, and the presence of possible hierophanies at San Gervasio is a strong hint also to seasonality; experiencing spectacular solar hierophanies at the very end of the pilgrim's path must have been a quite powerful and unforgettable experience. Pilgrims, however, need not have been the only devotees visiting the sanctuary. A key point in interpreting Cozumel was in fact trade: part of the worshippers were with all probability traders, who included a visit to the sanctuary of Cozumel during their business journey. In this respect, the island is similar to the sea-side sanctuaries of the Classical Age in the Mediterranean. Many such sanctuaries are in fact associated with important ports located on the main sea-trade routes. Examples are, for instance, the Etruscan sanctuary at Gravisca (Tarquinia) and the sanctuary of Ephesus, Turkey.

Conclusions

Understanding pilgrimage at Cozumel is quite complex, as it must be framed within a social scenario which is more complicated than that of a centralised state management. In spite of this, clear similarities with a state-controlled religious destination can be perceived. To better understand the processes of the management of the pilgrims, it would be very important to understand if there was a 'hub' for those people who travelled the Yucatan to reach the island; one obvious candidate for this place is Tulum. In addition, the internal routes (not necessarily the most functional or fastest between different sites) travelled by the pilgrims on the island should be better understood, as there exist places (such as the Arrecife temple on the north coast) which are candidates of 'stations' along the sacred routes travelled on the island. In this respect, a complete satellite-based recognition of the ancient Maya roads on the island would be highly recommended.



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Figure 4. Sacbé, ancient Maya route.

A hypothetical, complete reconstruction of the pilgrims' sacred path on the island would be a spectacular feat, both from the point of view of the archaeological research and from the fruition of the spectacular - cultural and natural - heritage of Cozumel.

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Figure 5. Sacbés leading to San Gervasio, Cozumel.